

# The enhancement of musical and other learning for both teachers and students through a weekly choir session

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## Abstract

Primary schools are such busy demanding places. Educators are concerned with a crowded curriculum and high emphasis placed on the development and cultivation of literacy and numeracy concepts. Teachers are generally concerned with the delivery and teaching expectations of all key learning areas of the primary school curriculum. However, the creative arts, in the real world of time and teaching are generally speaking, lower in priority. The majority of teachers believe their teaching time is dominated by attention to English and mathematics because the demands of departmental directives necessitate that students achieve benchmark standards in literacy and numeracy and this has had direct consequences for the creative arts key learning area. This individual small-scale study provides further insights into the impact of the arts, in particular the impact of singing, in one Australian primary school. This paper will present investigation through a small scale study, into how the benefits associated with the inclusion of children singing in a one hour weekly session, can not only influence and enhance students' musical learning, but also develop and enhance teachers' personal skill and confidence levels, while promoting other learning for all concerned across key learning areas.

Keywords: arts education, singing, teaching, confidence.

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## Introduction

Primary schools are such busy demanding places. Educators are concerned with a crowded curriculum and high emphasis placed on the development and cultivation of literacy and numeracy concepts. Teachers are generally concerned with the delivery and teaching expectations of all key learning areas of the primary school curriculum. However, the creative arts, in the real world of time and teaching are generally speaking, lower in priority. The majority of teachers believe their teaching time is dominated by attention to English and mathematics because the demands of departmental directives necessitate that students achieve benchmark standards in literacy and numeracy and this has had direct consequences

for the creative arts key learning area.

Engaging children in the creative arts can allow them to communicate in potentially profound ways (Eisner, 2002). As Russell-Bowie (2009, p. 5) reflects, the arts can embody and communicate emotions, ideas, beliefs and values. It can convey meaning through aesthetic forms and symbols and evoke emotive responses to life with or without words. Involving the creative arts in our curriculum is to represent learning not in the ordinary sense of language, as writing on a page, but in either a visual, kinaesthetic, aural or tactile form. With reference directly to the area of music, to see the connection in the classroom between music and mathematics, in patterns and numbers, the scientific aspects developed of sound and silence, the literacy features of emotive and descriptive language is remarkable. However,

syllabus requirements are, by and large, seen as being met for creative arts through end of year performances, exclusive arts days and special school assemblies. Schools have admitted it is difficult to have consistency and regularity in the arts curriculum, because of the time constraints and the lower educational priority given to the subject area in the curriculum (Alter, Hayes & O'Hara, 2009).

Gibson and Anderson (2008) argue that within the context of Australian schools there is an urgent need for a detailed study of the impact of arts programs. This small-scale study provides further insights into the impact of the arts, in particular the impact of singing, in one Australian primary school. This paper will present investigation through a small scale study, into how the benefits associated with the inclusion of children singing in a one hour weekly session can not only influence and enhance students' musical learning, but also develop and enhance teachers' personal skill and confidence levels, while promoting other learning for all concerned across key learning areas.

## Background

There is evidence to suggest that school arts programs can enhance students' potential to engage with school and learning more broadly (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004; Bamford, 2006; Catterall, Chapleau & Iwanaga, 1999). Hennessy (2000), Glover and Ward (1993), Bariseri (2000) and Heneghan (2001) have argued that music is for all a valued constituent of life, and it must be an important part of the school curriculum. However, recent reviews of arts education in Australia, such as the National Review of School Music Education (Department of Education, Science and Training, (2005) and the National Review of Education in Visual Arts, Craft, Design and Visual Communication (Davis, 2008) have shown a continued serious deficit in these areas in primary education over the past decade. However, a study conducted in the United Kingdom (Hargreaves, Lamont,

Marshall & Tarrant, 2003) showed that primary school teachers lacked confidence in teaching music, and that it was a subject which caused them the most stress in their teaching. Ruddock and Leong (2005) investigated relationships between non-musicians' concepts of what they considered 'musical' and their judgements of their own musicality and concluded that participants' negative judgements of their own musicality were related to lack of understanding of music, an inability to play an instrument and being adversely affected by a particular formal music learning situation in their past. Within a study conducted by Housego (1990) it was asserted that there are two significant, yet corresponding, factors attributed to a teacher's self-perception. These include teaching self-efficacy (or the individual's sense of whether they have the skills and abilities to assist student learning), and one's beliefs about one's own preparedness to teach. Ashton (1984) also suggested that teachers' expectations to achieve a desired goal from their teaching are influenced by a dimension of outcome expectation and their judgment of their ability to execute particular courses of action. Russell-Bowie (2009, p. 7) study of 936 generalist primary teachers across five countries found (a) that most 'had very little formal background in any of the art forms' and (b) that 'in every creative arts area, background is very strongly, and positively, predictive of confidence and enjoyment in teaching' regardless of gender. Eisner (1994, p. 17 cited in Alter, Hayes & O'Hara, 2009) comment that we are expecting generalist primary teachers to teach what they do not know and often do not love. A lack of value and support for the creative arts in learning at a systemic level can perpetuate already low levels of esteem for the creative arts and its implementation in the classroom among teachers.

Holden and Button (2006) suggest that generalist class teachers are in the best position to integrate music into the primary curriculum in a progressive and coherent way. One of the most substantial hindrances to effective teaching and learning of the creative arts in primary

schools appears to be a lack of confidence in teachers. Teachers do question their ability to recognise a child's potential in music if their own understanding and personal confidence levels of music is limited (Alexander, 1994). Moreover, in schools where other teachers are utilized as music specialists in the school, there has been a tendency to deploy them to 'do the music' rather than to support the generalist teacher in his or her teaching of music (Bariseri, 2000). Therefore, it emerges that the generalist class teacher is unlikely to acquire the necessary skills and experience to teach music effectively and is common to hear classroom teachers expressing feelings of their own inadequacy, indifference, nervousness and fear with regard to the implementation of the music curriculum (Holden & Button, 2006; Hennessey, 2000).

Commonly, educators have expressed their desire to teach music but reflect that they lack the understanding and perspective of the wealth that music encourages in children learning. However, if teachers believe they do not have the confidence to use music or to sing themselves in public, how then can they teach musical elements or use singing within their own classroom! It is the teachers' confidence in their own ability to perform the actions that lead to student learning. Bresler (1995) and Smith (2006) reflect it is a common misperception by teachers that musical talent is a prerequisite for singing. Yet, while a talent for spelling makes it easier to learn to spell, and a talent for solving mathematical problems makes the working of mathematics easier, we do not excuse children from spelling or mathematics due to lack of talent. We teach them skills to learn how to achieve those competencies. In the same way, teachers should also learn about music and the teaching of singing, and then through that knowledge and practising of these learnt skills, achieve those musical competencies (Smith, 2006).

It is important to acknowledge that singing is part of every child with a normal speaking voice. We use music to express emotions beyond

mere words and even very young children can and do, express inexpressible feelings in song. In the classroom or early childhood centre, no matter what is taught, there is likely a song that reflects the content, perspective, or emotion being explored. It is acknowledged that music is regarded as a difficult subject to teach because of the specificity of musical expertise; and there is a clear need for primary school teachers to receive training and support in relation to teaching music (Rogers, Hallam, Creech & Preti, 2008). Nonetheless, for those teachers who are not confident to include musical elements intrinsically or specifically within their classroom, many do integrate singing as an informal way to gain the children's attention and motivate their learning. Interestingly, teachers also utilize singing as a vehicle for other academic objects, such as the use of a song to memorize certain concepts. Others may use songs as a way to enhance the overall mood of the classroom, such as playing background music or as an entry to participation in school or community events. If people learn by constructing their own understanding of their experiences, then teaching is essentially a process of designing specific experiences and providing support for learners as they actively and interactively engage in those experiences (Poulou, 2007). Subsequently, within that learning will come recognition of understanding of other developmental processes that may occur.

## **Research aims**

It was against this background that an exploratory study into the use of singing (choir) in the classroom was initiated. A total of three teachers were involved in the study. The teachers were from a variety of backgrounds and ages and their level of expertise in the creative arts. The participants had an interest in the choir group and all taught at a range of levels in primary schools. These teachers included one who held an acting executive position, and all teachers taught mainstream classes which included children

with special needs. In light of the contextual background outlined above, qualitative research questions were raised to define the nature and scope of the study with implications for future research and music education:

- a. What aspects of knowledge of musical elements and personal confidence levels were established by the teachers themselves?
- b. Defining specific musical skills and aspects of learning being taught by these non specialist primary teachers within this particular setting when children were engaged in a formal choir setting;
- c. Were there any additional areas of learning that was being addressed and expanded upon into other areas of curriculum and learning within this form of education?

## The setting

The setting involved one particular school in a Northern NSW geographical setting, with the 'school choir' consisting of ninety primary school children from Years three to six (ages seven to twelve years). This equates to almost one-third of the school population being involved in the choir. The children with an almost equal mixture of boys and girls work under the direction of two female and one male classroom teachers. The students volunteer their time to attend the choir weekly session on one afternoon for duration of one hour singing duration. These primary aged children were given the opportunity and choice at the beginning of the school year to attend, with the provision that once they committed their time they were 'in the choir to stay' for the duration of the year. Investigation of the material used each week for this choir repertoire consisted of musical tracks taken from the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) Sing books. The words and occasionally the music were generally placed into a booklet or on an interactive whiteboard and each week added to when new songs were introduced.

## Procedure

Data and analysis for the small scale research programme were gathered over three school terms of ten weeks from the three generalist teachers involved in the weekly singing program. Video and interview data was analysed employing inductive, qualitative procedures and exploratory study was undertaken with three participants. Data was obtained through the use of a completed questionnaire and transcripts from semi structured interviews, video recordings of choir sessions, video interviews with the staff as a whole and then conducted individually with the researcher and recorded to video tape for future analysis. The methods gave the respondents opportunities to explain how they perceived their own musical ability, their own personal music learning experiences, their confidence in teaching musical elements and musical activities, and whether they believed their teaching and delivery of the weekly singing resulted in any other learning within the curriculum. The methods used were designed to enable the teachers to comment on significant issues of immediate concern to them. The video recording of the choir classes demonstrated the concepts, techniques and actual participation of the children employed by the teachers being utilized in the choir class.

## Initial discussion

From this first phase analysis of the data, not one of the teachers had studied music at teachers college in any depth, and that their 'formal' training and knowledge of musical concepts was through in-service courses and basic classroom experience within their professional teaching time. Generally, respondents thought their initial training and further professional development courses themselves lacked sufficient depth for them to teach music in any depth and all affirmed that though they knew small aspects, they required more guidance in developing

and realising these expectations. They felt they were teaching the children just 'how to sing and to enjoy what they were doing' some small understanding of musical elements but not many intrinsic or extrinsic aspects. Despite their view that the creative arts did not have high educational status in their school and community, many of the teachers emphasised that they believed attitudes and opinions were slowly shifting. However, the three teachers involved, all believed that a music teacher requires formal musical skills, be able to play an instrument proficiently and the ability to read music.

*I think a proper choir teacher at least has to know more about singing and what to do and how to manage a choir and to have the knowledge primarily of what you are talking about. To teach music properly you need to have had a formal music education..., we just do singing. (Teacher 1)*

Although this small group of choir teachers carried the responsibility for developing this area throughout their school, their role did not include a place in the management hierarchy. It was purely a volunteer position. The respondents stated that they took the weekly choir because they valued the importance of the singing for the children; this was the only formal opportunity within the school to achieve some musical expectations and to meet aspects of the curriculum requirements of performance. They all worked at the school together in a team teaching format and believed that they could establish an ethos whereby they were learning from one another through sharing good practice and developing co-operation. From the interviews, it was ascertained that these teachers' original aim was to expose the children to various styles of music, to perceive and allow the enjoyment of singing to occur generally, and to give children some basic skills in sight singing and tonality, with the extrinsic intention of performance at school presentations and within the local community.

*The children highly enjoy singing and this was the main motivation for our choir work. (Teacher 1)*

The three respondents felt that this initial objective of singing for performance was achieved quite well and the children were quite settled into one open classroom for the singing session. They alleged that their weekly work with the children was valued by them and other staff for the choir session only and for performances.

*The children appeared to take great pleasure in the time they share in this area of the curriculum, through just by watching them ... with clear visual representations of their eager and involved expressive faces and definitely by their enthusiasm to sing. (Teacher two)*

*You can see it when they sing, they smile and do actions and have a good time with us. (Teacher 1)*

Investigation of material used each week for this choir time showed that the songs selected were related to children's interests in the classroom and teachers personal confidence in the material sourced. Using the musical tracks taken from the ABC Sing books, the children generally sang along with the recorded singer on the associated CDs. Some additional material from varied sources was at times used.

Together, they made decisions as a team with the song selection because of the diverse range of children ages. It was seen by the teachers that because of the difference and diversity in age within the choir, there were at times considerable 'distance' between the types of songs selected. The type of song chosen needed to cater for differences in ages of the students. At times, harder songs in various degrees of difficulty were selected to further develop the senior students in the group, (N=39) and more simple songs utilised for the younger grades.

*Although they were considered "boring" by the older students, this senior group understood the necessity for the level of this simple song and their generosity to the younger children was unanimous, but in turn, the younger children also had a go at the more advanced songs. (Teacher 2)*

*We felt that this was sharing a musical conversation network. (Teacher 1)*

*We do try to encourage correct singing by singing the song ourselves... taking turns... and teaching some of what we believe are the important parts of singing... this is really hard but we do have a go, then it is backed up with the use of the CD and it all comes together. (Teacher 1)*

## The method and process

The teachers involved used a number of different measures to develop the primary students' ability to sing well. They used their own voices where they felt the children were not pitching certain sections of the song correctly. The teacher would sing repeatedly the phrase with the children. They felt repetition, echo singing and use of movement hand signs for showing the levels of pitch in the song assisted in the students understanding of where and what the music was doing.

*I haven't got a great voice, but when I sing, I also use my hands and that helps. After I used my hands to show the notes, I asked them, what was my hand doing and they replied showing us how high or low to send our voices. (Teacher 3)*

Words and the music (as in notation) were introduced in some songs through the song sheets presented on the interactive whiteboard to the children and together, would discuss the music pattern on the music stave. Discussion of where the notes were going in a physical visual capacity in relation to high and low was undertaken with acknowledgement and understanding being seen as accomplished through the raised hands and children answers as to "It goes up here ... and down there ... we sing high...we sing low" (Teacher three).

Strategies of obtaining and maintaining correct pitch without the volume increasing or decreasing was also utilised in this timeframe. From the video data, it was observed the teachers ensured through their own physical demonstration that changes in bodily concepts such as jaws strutting out, or their necks stretched up when singing high were not employed. Rather,

their posture remained the same even though the pitch had changed. Through the video data this was shown to be reinforced each lesson. Kodaly hand signs were also employed which assisted them in promoting correct pitch singing.

*We took it in turns and used the hand signs and the children began to watch my hand, because when I am teaching them, they will watch my hands and use their voices as my hand moves. They also use their own hands moving with me and I guess they are listening and pitching their voices to my hands. (Teacher two)*

Some of the singing material used within the class, at times did not lend themselves to a specific beginning melody note and the children had to learn to listen to the music, to themselves and to each other to pitch the note correctly from the instrumental introduction. When the teachers used the recorded singer, the choir would generally commence the song at the correct time, but when instrumental tracks alone were used, this then became a challenge. Continuous practice and reinforcement of the introductory phrases were demonstrated by the teachers to the group and the more confident the children became in their own ability to sing, the better they pitched the first note and timing.

*I would sing the first phrase without the music, they would echo me, and then we would sing together the same phrase with the accompaniment so they listened to when they had to come in...and it worked after a while...as they had to listen to the music, and listen to each other to come in on that right note. (Teacher three)*

Duration concepts such as 'longer notes' for example, understanding about semibreves, tied notes, shorter notes, were also visually seen and reinforced by the teachers ,when they were following the music on the screen. Staccato notes, legato notes were all explored through the singing of these songs. From the data viewed and collected, the children appeared to understand what duration concepts they were singing. Simple Italian musical terms like legato and

vivace were introduced in various sessions by the team of teachers and discussion of explicit way of singing was also conveyed through this teaching.

Musical rests were an integral part of their learning to read the music and it was introduced as "to simply have a rest." The children's understanding were acknowledged through their answers of questions pertaining to rests with responses such as "because the music tells us to do this." Concepts of sound and silence were being developed.

These sessions also addressed tone colour as the teachers asked the students to listen to the instruments used on the recorded sessions within the accompaniment. Brief exchange of questions and responses concerning the use of various instruments and sounds in the listening time would follow, with perceptions of understanding attained through the interactive dialogue with the children.

Conversation in relation to dynamics within the material used was also part of the choir sessions. The teachers noted that in particular songs the children over sang and performed loud dynamics, particularly when they sang with the recorded singer; they went out of tune in order to be louder. In the discussion with the teachers, they felt this needed to be overcome in relation to developing good intonation in their young voices. The teachers felt it was the choice of song.

*In some of the songs we chose, the children sang loud and when they do this they go out of tune in order to be louder...like they are competing with each other and the singer. (Teacher 1)*

To address this concern of dynamics, they chose a wide repertoire of songs demonstrating their understanding and ability to have the children sing in tune but which also held their interest with a wide range of tempos and dynamics. When developing a song, they gave the students the opportunity to listen and to hear what the singer was doing, followed by live demonstrations of how they should attend to change in dynamics when singing as a group to

the accompaniment. The teachers also believed that the choir understanding the story, the words and what they were singing about, definitely assisted the choir with the context of the song and the emotion and dynamic, be it an intended performance or just for enjoyment in singing themselves. Teachers took time when introducing a song, to help the children understand the context of that song. They preferred the children to sing so the audience listening could understand the words and the story told.

*Interestingly, we realised that the singing time also became a literacy lesson as we would pursue what various words meant and what the song itself was about. Sometimes it was a history lesson. We would look at the words and think about what they meant and how we could express them." (Teacher one)  
When we taught a song we would teach the story and the background if there was one behind the song so they knew what the song was about.... (Teacher 3)*

*Through the words, the meanings of the words and the phrases we discussed in choir time, many children, particularly the older girls and boys would understand it better and when a child from one of their classes who had been sick for a while passed away from cancer, the choir sang the song "The Flower that Shattered the Stone" (Sing 2008). At this assembly, they weren't just singing the song; they were singing the words and the emotion in those words, you could see it in their faces. (Teacher two)  
One of the other staff members told me that her year three children after we did the song "Electricity" excerpt from the musical Billy Elliot (Sing 2010) went back and told her about what the song was about and what the phrase "I'm free" means and why the song was important, that was interesting! (Teacher 1)*

The team utilised the facility of singing in rounds and partner songs. Rounds were introduced in this period of observation time. The songs 'Batman Shimmy' (Sing, 2008) and 'Charlie Chaplin went to France' (Sing, 2008), were introduced. These later supported their tonality of round

when they sang the partner songs 'Do you want to Dance/ Blue Moon' (Sing, 2007) and 'Rhythm of Life' (Sing, 1998).

*We wanted to do these because we felt they were all great opportunities to further develop their listening skills as they sang two different songs against each other and children were very keen to sing these, and then presented them all as part of an assembly performance. It was a great learning curve for me too! (Teacher one)*

The teachers utilised one particular song 'Why we sing' (Sing, 2008) to give essence to simple but beautiful harmonies. The children on the recorded version sang an echo but also harmony a third above the melody line. Teaching this was attained slowly with demonstrations by staff voices, dividing the group into two sections as they did with the rounds and using all staff members to sing with the children.

In respect to the teachers' own perceptions or further understandings of techniques and skills undertaken with the students in these sessions, they all commented upon the children as a whole. They felt that a main attribute, which was stated by all three teachers, that developed through working with the children were the aspects of group work and group cohesiveness. The three teachers commented on the cohesiveness of the group as they worked together despite the differences in children ages and the large size of the group.

*They really worked well as a team, we had the obvious behaviour problems but when it came to learning particular bits, and as far as singing, they combined together and performed as a whole group. When they did the harmony bits or it was their section to sing, smaller groups within the one group worked well and then we came back together as one. We worked collectively as a group interacting between all of us and the children, everyone helped each other. (Teacher three)*

*We felt that the effectiveness of the whole group dynamics also improved classroom management strategies and ultimately the group work in each week's session. (Teacher 2)*

*When they sang together they were so confident and obviously felt as a whole group, when they were up on the stage in their lines and facing me, they were a whole group, you could feel it, right from the group of year six children in the middle on the top row of the steps to the year three students who were the littlest and on the first step and spread all along the bottom line...they sang as a group and we were one choir...that was such a special feeling. (Teacher 1)*

Dialogue was undertaken with the three generalist primary staff as to whether they believed what they were doing each week had an impact on themselves personally or on any other any additional area of learning. Through this, all three teachers commented upon their feelings of lack of personal musical experience and musical knowledge, and what they were doing really was 'just singing'. However, discussion revealed all three teachers expressed feelings of definite increased confidence in their personal musical abilities and their ability to teach music in the classroom.

*When I started doing this, I felt I knew a little bit about music, but not enough to do it confidently on my own. I knew I could try and when the other two said that they would also do the choir with me, I thought okay...let's sing and have a good time. However, it is unbelievable how much I have learnt from this experience and from working with the children and the other staff. (Teacher 3)*

*I knew what pitch was, and I knew what dynamics meant but to actually use it and to see it in practice when we practise and learn songs was very different to just knowing about it and paying lip service to the terms. Seeing it in action is quite different- it helps them and me, to understand what it all means instead of seeing it in a book. (Teacher 2)*

*All three participants agreed that in particular, working together as a team increased that ability and confidence. All three teachers concurred that they could introduce musical activities in their own classroom if they had more time in the week.*

*It was great to know that we worked together and when I did not know something I knew one of the others could help me out and then I knew what to do. (Teacher 3)*

*We all learnt the Kodaly hand signs together as we felt that was important to help the children in their singing...that was hard at first but after all of us using it and teaching with it, it helped. (Teacher 2)*

*I know more about music now than I did at the beginning of the year, but I still have got so much to learn. (Teacher 1)*

In the direction of other learning, apart from increase ability in confidence as a group singing together, the respondents felt that many attributes of their weekly session did help with other areas. The respondents commented upon the use of warm up chants and rhythms they used and how this was also seen in use within the classroom. They believed they were helping the children immensely with literacy skills as well as singing because children were reading material and then also transferred to memory retention and recognition of various understandings in both musical and visual literacy.

*I know one of my own year three students who cannot read very well, loves coming to choir as he can read and sing at the same time...maybe it is through hearing the words but I believe he is initially reading the song words first on the screen and definitely understanding what they mean...I think that is so important as it gives him that personal sense of achievement and that is so important." He is reading the words and singing just like all the others. (Teacher 3)*

## **Analysis and Discussion**

A number of valuable outcomes emerged from this small study. Importantly, the study helped to establish a better understanding of the values and attitudes influencing approaches to the use of singing in the primary school environment. The findings raise some of the contentious issues in regard to the confidence aspect by educators

of the teaching of music, but also determined an insight into how a weekly session of choir singing, taught by generalist primary teachers, can develop other intrinsic and extrinsic benefits can occur. This can now extend into focusing on the questions of confidence and practice to effectively teach music within the primary curriculum.

Researchers have argued that it was not the level of musical skill itself but the relationship between that skill and the confidence to teach music that was important (Bresler, 1993; Gifford, 1991; Gifford, 1993; Russell-Bowie, 2009). Learning to sing is often a combination of developing better musical skills and the building of confidence (Kim & Choy, 2008). Any opportunity created to evaluate beliefs and understanding regarding the skills of teaching and teacher role identity in relation to the context of music teaching is essential. Studying these interactions of teacher, learner, and the contextual setting in a specific classroom, or analysing videotape from actual practice has served to further reveal to teachers both their own beliefs and preconceptions about teaching and learning music and the wider influence on learning. These contextualized experiences have perhaps the greatest potential to influence ongoing development and refinement of teacher beliefs (Thompson, 2007). Even though this study was conducted through a small scale research, it was evident from this weekly session of singing, positive outcomes were apparent in the development of musical skills and singing confidence levels of the children and skills in the teachers' level of expertise and confidence development in teaching music.

Various learning outcomes were extended through the use of this weekly choir setting. In a child centred curriculum, the choice of song and how it can be utilised is important. This choice, relative to the children interests can be a powerful educational tool, giving information about what the child knows and what they would like to know (Smith, 2006). Basic graphic

notation awareness was developed parallel to the differentiating learning styles of auditory and visual cues. Development of pitch understanding and tonality was developed with various methods learnt and developed initially by the team of teachers and then employed to precipitate that learning outcome for the children and their musical learning. To be able to sing with correct intonation, singers of any age must be able to do three things, that is, to listen, think and sing. The ability to listen develops three basic areas involving the ability to concentrate, the ability to understand what you are listening to and the capacity to remember sounds and sound sequences. Listening skills were developed and enhanced.

Perceptive, knowledgeable listening requires time before any significant understanding takes place. Understanding what is being listened to involve recognition and discrimination of sound and ultimately the children in the choir had to learn to listen, to really listen. The children and the teachers enhanced their skills of listening, including growth of skills of pitch, to the singer, to small demonstrations musically by the teacher, to themselves as individuals and as a group, when singing with each other. The listening skills as suggested by Russell-Bowie (2009) developed in music lessons are of great benefit to children throughout the whole curriculum, and creativity and problem solving skills children develop as they hear music and continue to make their own musical compositions are vital to creating a well-rounded child, able to perform confidently in the twenty-first century. Discussion of sound and the process of applying descriptive, emotive words to these sounds heard, all played an important part in the work with this choir. In this process of learning a song each week, they were hearing sound, discussing sound, 'reading' patterns, listening, reading and establishing pitch and duration of the notes they were singing. Elliot (2005) reflects that learning to listen and then to make and hear musical expressions of emotions is not something

that happens automatically for all students. He suggests that we must teach for this kind of awareness, ability, and sensitivity.

Group collegiality was deemed as a hidden benefit of this group interaction, for both teachers and students. Group activities assist with sharpening members' communication skills as well as enhancing their cognitive skills (Petress, 2004). Working in groups requires those members to listen and work together with each other. This was evident in their interaction as a group. The children and teachers in this weekly setting, all valued that they were equally as important as each other and allowed themselves to enter the arena where teamwork was demanded. It is acknowledged that the arts build self-esteem in the child who feels accepted and important. Diversity, awareness, tolerance and acceptance of each other was also apparent in their reception of the types of songs used (relative to particular age group), and evident in the remembrance presentation for one of their peers. Effective group dynamics also improves classroom management strategies and ultimately group work, when done effectively, expands and stimulates students' interest and increases their confidence. This was an additional area of learning the teachers did not consider when commencing working with the choir but became transparent within and outside of choir time. Interestingly, intrinsic learning was not through conditional and formally structured lesson planning. The varied techniques and concepts taught were opportunistically explored within the moment while the actual songs were being taught and practised each week. As opportunities arose, the three teachers explored and developed further musical concepts and skills as they became apparent.

Partnership teaching was established. All three respondents said that partnership teaching was crucial in support of their colleagues and central to this collegial strategy. Partnership teaching fosters professional growth and development through bringing together people with different

skills and experiences. It promotes an opportunity for the dissemination of new knowledge and the implementation of new initiatives. Button and Potter (2006) derived that communication is improved through collaboration, allowing problems to be identified, shared and tackled. Partnership teaching can lead to new ways of working and provide stimulation, enrichment and empowerment for the class teacher in the context of the classroom. It creates a feeling of identity and commitment to school improvement, and avoids isolated teachers becoming a barrier to school improvement (Ainscow, 2000). This was established in the dialogue with the three respondents; they valued the shared input of their colleagues with music teaching and in turn it further enhanced and developed their own confidence in teaching the skills of music in the choir setting. To enhance all attributes explored in this setting, essence of time and development of confident instruction are required if we are to expect children to not only learn to perform, but perform beautifully and with confidence (Jeanneret, 1997).

## **Implications for educators**

In an ideal world, children would be engaged in music daily throughout their childhood and beyond, inspired and led by motivating and well-resourced music educators. However, we live in a world which is definitely not ideal. In many countries, music and other arts subjects are given a low priority compared with the basic skills of literacy and mathematics (Russell-Bowie, 2009). The musical benefits of being engaged in music education are well known to those who have sung in a choir, played an instrument or listened carefully to music. The awakening and nurturing of the aesthetic spirit as part of the development of an aesthetic education is a challenge for every teacher, whether specialist or generalist, but brings great rewards, both tangible and non-tangible (McKellar, 1990; Reimer, 1989).

Unfortunately teachers seldom regularly integrate musical concepts, or regard them as being on the same level of importance as other subjects (Baker & Saunders, 1994; Bresler, 1993; Giles & Frego, 2004; Propst, 2003; Whitaker, 1996; Seddon & Biasutti, 2008).

## **The children**

Though uniquely different in appearance and method from each other, creative arts disciplines do employ cognitive processes, allowing language and thought to be expressed through varied representations. Music as part of the creative arts key learning area within the primary curriculum is an essential component of every Australian primary school. From this study it can be seen that multifaceted academic benefits for the children are evident through the use of a weekly singing session and ultimately the transference of this learning into the general classroom. The integrated characteristics of singing are branched into other areas of curriculum such as literacy, mathematics and history. Teachers recognize that students more readily remember facts when they are put to a rhythm. The kindergarten to year six children can be heard remembering numerical and literacy concepts through a song. Early childhood programs are devoted to learning facts and concepts through use of songs. Through the use of printed words of a song, children are learning to build sight vocabulary. Characteristics of repetition, vocabulary, pattern and rhythm in chants and songs has assisted in developing students oral language skills. The predictive and repetitive value reflected in song text and recurrence of words within a song is highly beneficial, because repeated exposure to words ensure reading fluency (Brown, 2000; Geller, 1984). Singing and the use of songs, that is the initial reading of the words, also assists and represent a value for disadvantaged readers who may not be motivated to read more traditional

forms of text whereas the reading of the words from a song book are highly motivational to these learners. Geller (1984) reflects that reading can be deemed as 'fun' when students combine the musicality of songs with word meanings. For teachers searching for effective strategies that stimulate students, singing and reading words of a song can present rich instructional possibilities.

## The teachers

Each school needs to give music adequate time and resources to implement the syllabus, thereby indicating clearly that the school values and prioritises music education, both for itself, and for the benefits it brings to development both in teachers and children. National policies and syllabuses need to reflect a higher priority for music than they are currently given. As teachers, we should be providing sufficient combination of content, knowledge and opportunities to practice integration of singing into the curriculum. However, until that happens nationwide, it is important to remember that generalist classroom teachers do not need to be highly knowledgeable about music in order to teach singing or to work with a choir once a week. They do not need to have years of experience to sing proficiently to integrate music and develop musical skills in their school.

When teachers are more confident with making music themselves, they are more likely to teach music and to teach it successfully. By using the notion of singing in a classroom, or through a primary school augmentation of choir, musical concepts and skill development is evident. Through more and more teachers feeling confident in their own ability in 'simply having a go' to include singing in their school, music education will be valued and taught in every classroom and to every child. Teachers just need to enjoy music, to sing, and encourage children to sing with them. From this point, the extended learning process for all concerned is insurmountable.

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